



21 PENTECOST
OCTOBER 17/18, 2015

1ST, MARSHALL
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Ruth 1:1-17; Mark 3:33-35
Who Are You?

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

P: *I lift my eyes to the hills...*

C: *where will my help come...?*

Who are you? How would you describe yourself if you were:

- applying to a college? Or,
- seeking a job with...the F.B.I.? Or,
- hoping to serve overseas in the Peace Corps? Or,
- describing yourself for a *Match.com* profile?

How would you describe *who you are*...and would it matter?

The **answer** is almost always **YES** – it **does** matter how we describe ourselves – in fact, how we describe ourselves tells the world a whole **lot** about **who we are** and **whose we are**. **Some** folks take that stuff pretty seriously – as they should!

When our son, Mark, was about to be given a **high security clearance** as a pilot in the Air Force, they sent a man to Anchorage who interviewed:

- us, his parents,
- the people who wrote him letters of recommendation,
- teachers and coaches at his high school,
- parents of high school buddies,
- they even interviewed a family down the hill whose children he had babysat a few times!

In today's **bible** story, we meet Naomi and Ruth, two women who have been forced to *re-visit* this same question, **review** their circumstances and **revise** their answers. Life has made them drink **deeply** from the **bitter** cup of **grief** and **loss**. In fact, Naomi feels **so** overwhelmed that she even tries to **close** herself **off** from the closest family she has left.

As the choir sang a few minutes ago, we can imagine Naomi crying out in tears of grief these words from Psalm 121:

P: *I lift my eyes to the hills...*

C: *where will my help come...?*

Yet Naomi's cry, she feels, will go unanswered. For, she says to the young women in v. 14, *the hand of the Lord has turned against me*.

She orders her widowed daughters-in-law to go back to their own families – where, at the very least they will find a measure of protection from hardship and danger.

For Naomi is powerless to guarantee them **anything**. Still, **Ruth** chooses to **remain** with her mother-in-law, forsaking the **security** of her family's *home*, her *home town*, her *home country*.

This young woman, who is left with nothing:
-not a **home**, -not a **people**, -not a **god**...

...still, pledges her **life**, her **heart**, and her **soul** in service to **Naomi**: her country, her people, and her God. Says Ruth, *Where **you** go, **I** will go...**your** people shall be **my** people, and **your** God **my** God...*

What a contrast between these two women: one who has nothing to hope for, and the other who'll give up everything she has...to...hope for...???

P: *I lift my eyes to the hills...*
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Naomi relents, and allows Ruth to accompany her back to Judah. **We can't** know what was going on in **either** of their hearts – neither **why** Naomi wished her sons' wives to **leave** her, nor **why** Ruth refused to let her mother-in-law go home alone.

But we get a **clue** that's spoken loud and clear when the two women finally make it back to Bethlehem. Like in small towns throughout the world, the news travels fast.

She, who had left them years ago as a proud **wife** and **mother**, now returns as a grieving widow, a grieving parent, and a lonely soul.

Is this Naomi? the women of Bethlehem ask aloud [the name **Naomi** means *pleasant*]. ²⁰ She says to *them*,

*Call me no longer **Naomi**, call me **Mara** (which means *bitter*),
 for the Almighty has dealt *bitterly* with me.*

²¹ *I went away **full**, but the Lord has brought me back **empty**;
 why call me **Naomi** when the Lord has dealt **harshly** with me,
 and the Almighty has brought **calamity** upon me?"*

4 times in 2 verses Naomi accuses God of causing her pain...

**Is that a valid complaint for anyone to make?
 Is it a complaint that **we sometimes make?

P: *I lift my eyes to the hills...*
 C: *where will my help come from...?*

Let's be clear: these two women faced **great** peril. As widows unconnected with a man, they were on the **lowest** rung of the social ladder – Naomi only slightly higher than Ruth, because at the **very** least, **Naomi** was **Jewish**. **Ruth**, as a Moabite, could expect to find absolutely **no** kindness, **no** compassion, **no** concern for her well-being.

At best, they would be *ignored*. At worst, they would be **victimized** at every turn...

So, Naomi was a **realist**: the odds against them surviving for long were worse than a snowman's chances...in...*summer* (if you know the movie **FROZEN!!!**). Yet **Ruth** is bound and determined to **stay** with Naomi – even under such a threat.

What drove her to make such a sacrifice? Why didn't she look to her **own welfare and go back to her **own** family?

The 1998 movie entitled *Life is Beautiful* tells the story of a Jewish man in WWII Italy. He falls in love with a Christian woman, they get married, have a baby boy – and for them life IS beautiful...until the Italian government agrees with Hitler that people of **Jewish** descent cannot be a part of their *beautiful life* in Italy. The man and his son are sent to the trains that will take them to a concentration camp...

What would **you do if you were the **wife** of this Jewish man and the **mother** of this child between you??? *Life isn't always beautiful, is it?*

P: *I lift my eyes to the hills...*

C: *where will my help come...?*

Well, the wife and mother, who cannot **abide** the idea of saying goodbye to her husband and son, follows in the footsteps of Ruth... She **begs** the soldiers to allow her on the train – and they gladly oblige her request.

The father and son are housed together in the camp... He works hard to convince his young son that they're all involved in a great **contest**, and that those, who **endure** through **all** the challenges they face, will win a fantastic prize... The mother, who is housed elsewhere in camp, can only **imagine** how they're doing – though her husband manages to get a **few** messages to his beloved. Yet, she is there... **committed** to her husband, **and** to her son...and in **this** way she is Ruth to Naomi...

The ending of the movie is **very uplifting**, but **also** very sad. Minutes before the camp is liberate by the Allies, the **father** is **killed** by a **guard**. Yet, due to her...sacrificial act, the **mother** is there to rescue their son.

The ending of our bible story for today is far less **bloody**, but **not** without some danger and drama. When **Naomi** shares with **Ruth** the news that she has a wealthy relative named Boaz, Ruth asks her for permission to go work in the fields to earn them some food.

Again, as a young foreign woman – unattached to any **man** – she would **literally** have to face the **whim** of **any** man she **met**.

Still, Ruth persists, **finds** her way to the field of Boaz, and works in the hot sun for **hours**. When Boaz arrives from Bethlehem to check on the harvest, he notices the young foreigner and asks his servant about her.

When he discovers that this is **Naomi's** daughter-in-law, he **offers** her his protection, and **gives** her permission to work in his fields. She is **dumbfounded** by his kindness, but then he says to her: *All that you have*

done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me... ¹² May the Lord reward you for your deeds...under whose wings you have come for refuge!

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Here is where Naomi's journey to **resolve** that question ***Who are you?*** comes full circle. She left Israel with the name ***pleasant***. After her **painful** journey through the *valley of the shadow of death*, she adopted the name ***bitter***. Yet, through the determination of her *devoted*, dependable and, apparently, delightful daughter-in-law, Ruth, life's wheel turns again and hope brings them home in more ways than one.

At the **end** of the story, Ruth and Boaz fall in *love*. **She** goes to let him know of her **affection**...and comes back with a big bag full of barley. When Naomi sees Ruth returning with her treasure, and, we can assume, a beautiful **smile**, she asks her daughter-in-law a very pointed question.

Now, in **our** bibles it reads, ***How did things go with you, my daughter?***

But, according to Kathryn Schifferdecker, a Prof. of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, a **literal** translation conveys something different. In the Hebrew language, Naomi asks Ruth, not merely ***How did things go with you, my daughter?*** but, instead, **Who are you, my daughter?**

In other words, *are you still Ruth the Moabite,*
-widow of my son,
-sad companion with me through this journey of grief?

Or *are you the bringer of both bread for our bodies, food for our souls, hope for our spirits, and promises of a new life of love?*

It should come as no surprise that, in the **end**, Ruth and Boaz are married. In time they have a baby boy, and Naomi, as grandma, becomes his caregiver... Even **more** than that, they all live *happily ever after*...no wait, that's the **Walt Disney** version...

This is *real* life, so it's never **perfect**, although they come pretty close – in fact, here's **one** case where **reality** may even be **better** than fantasy. For through the child born to **Ruth** and **Boaz**...will **one** day come **King David**...and many generations after **that**, *Jesus of Nazareth*. Not even **Walt Disney** can top **that**!

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All along, it seems, that Ruth knew the answer to this question. It sure seems that, for some reason, she knew that her help, that their help, would come from the Lord, the God of Israel.

Naomi did too, I'm sure, but the pain of so much grief seemed too hard to bear. Yet look at what can happen when a trusting soul dares to enter the pain of one who feels tempted to give up on God.

Who are you?

Who has **God** called you to be?

Who has God called **you** to be **Ruth** to...?

Knowing where **your** help will come from will allow you to bless the world around you with the good news of God's grace through Jesus Christ our Lord. Indeed, with such grace to fill our hearts and minds, we can only confess that *life is beautiful!* Amen.